

## [Villa Alexandria and Jacksonville]

26056

July 7, 1959.

David Mitchell,

319 Law Exchange Bldg.,

Care W. R. Harwick,

Lawyer,

Jacksonville, Florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

VILLA ALEXANDRIA and JACKSONVILLE

IN 1870 - 1880.

Mr. David Mitchell, the grandson of Alexander Mitchell, Florida's first multi-millionaire, and Mrs. Mitchell, who established Villa Alexandria, (now the Swisher estate) in South Jacksonville, was interviewed in the office of his life-long friend, Mr. William M. Harwick, lawyer, 319 Law exchange building, Forsyth and Market-sts.

Mr. Mitchell is a slight, thin man, of probably 6sixty-four years of age, having been about eight when his grandmother first brought him to Jacksonville from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the city where Alexander Mitchell founded his vast fortune through the mediums of banking, railroad promotion, stocks, bonds and securities. According to records on file in the museum of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad, in Chicago, which road

## Library of Congress

he founded and of which he was President, Mr. Mitchell was one of America's foremost financiers.

David Mitchell's inheritance has dwindled until now, he states, he is supplied with small funds for his slight personal needs from a trust fund administered by [Bion?] H. Barnett, of the Barnett National Bank. He makes his home at the Burbridge Hotel Annex takes his meals at the National Lunch, and spends his days in the offices of his more prosperous friends of the 2 1880's, and his evenings at the Jacksonville Public Library. He is fond of reading and is especially interested in history.

Mr. Mitchell was neatly dressed in a white linen suit, and talked with vim and eagerness, his blue eyes twinkling as he interspersed his interview with homely philosophy and a few choice slang expressions, current fifty years ago.

"I landed here first in 1883, when I was about eight years of age, but I do not remember much about the prominent people of Jacksonville of that period. I was sent abroad, went to school in different places, traveled over the world, and returned permanently to Jacksonville in 1893. These days are now known as the 'gay nineties' and the '[mouve?] decade,' said David Mitchell.

"The people I knew, and with whom I most frequently associated then were not the 'nice people' but racetrack followers, gamblers, etc., and I [can?] give you chronological data on cock-fighting, which was one of my chief interests.

"I did knew [Bion?] H. Barnett, Colonel Deckrell, and other citizens prominent in those days, who have become the 'first line of defense' for our fair city, as time has tested their quality and understanding. But I seem to be living now in a world of my own, as most of those with whom I associated are now dead - at least a great many of them.

"Where was I educated? Say, I went to more schools in more different places than anybody who ever lived in Duval County. You see, there were lots of things I would

## Library of Congress

rather do than attend school, so three months was about as long as I ever lasted at any educational institution. I would either be expelled, or would get so "sick" that the old lady - (Mrs. Alexander Mitchell, his grandmother, by whom he was reared) - would have me brought home. I went to Barnes University, to the University of California at Berkeley, and to various schools in Washington, D. C." POLO PONIES:

"Through various associations with young men in the north and west I learned to play polo and it was my favorite pastime.

"I got other young men interested and we used to have some great games in a field at Hansontown - a negro settlement adjoining the plot owned by the Cleaveland Fibre factory where the big fire of May 3, 1901, started. It was not then in the city limits, and is in what is now the [West Beaver?] street section of Jacksonville. It was a nice level piece of flat woods land, and made a splendid polo field.

"The young men who need to play were R. B. Dell, W. A. Dell, Montgomery [Cerse?], an Englishman by the name of [Curtain?], and two other Englishmen - Harry White and a Mr. Sudlew. Harry White was the first agent for the Clyde Steamship Line, and worked in the office on the river.

"Our polo ponies were not blooded stock, neither were they trained. Any likely looking [pony?] served our purpose - some were small race horses from "scrub" tracks. One of the best ones I ever had I found one day hitched to a huckster's cart on Bridge Street. He looked like he would be quick in turning and fast on the field - ideal for polo. I said to his [Syrian?] owner: 'I wish to buy that pony; how much?' 'You pay me fifteena dolla, and you take' said Dominice. I climbed on the cart and [went?] home with him and the deal was closed. I had to most half kill him before I broke him in. "The pony was tough, quick, and ran like lightning. I christened him '[Bug?]' because he darted here and there with such fury. He was a delight to ride on the polo field. But one day I had a bad spill - no, not from Bug - which closed my polo activities, and the horse was sold.

## Library of Congress

"The last time I saw old Bug was one day out on the Fernandina road. He was hitched to a little road-wagon and was engaged in the business of running away - all by himself, tearing down the road and running like the Devil. Evidently his polo training had re-asserted itself and he was going nowhere in a hurry. He was a great gift to polo in our days, and was the gamest little horse I ever [saw?]. He just would not quit, no matter how stiff the [pace.]"?

### FIRST COUNTRY CLUB:

"The first Jacksonville Country Club was established by [W. A.?] Dell, [Bion?] Barnett, Montgomery [Cerse?], and others of the old polo players in Fairfield where the A. C. L. R. R. yards are located, just this side of the Municipal Docks, in 1893. It got off to a good start, and everything went very well from the beginning. We had a small clubhouse first, about 40 x [60?] feet in extent. We played golf, and once a week had field days, when we served tea to the ladies. Ike Brereton as another of those interested, and James [Sprizt?], whom I have known since I was knee high to a duck.

5

"Bion Barnett was the 'star' polo player, and also golfer. We - that is, this same crowd - established a special Golf Club in South Jacksonville in 1895.

"We had an option on the farms in the section near the [Municipal?] Docks where the first Country Club was established, which we sold when the A. C. L. R. R. desired to locate in that section, and established the Florida Country Club in the Riverside section. The Florida Country Club was more or less [plebeian?] always, and later on Mr. Mucklow, the English [Consul?] here, Mr. Montgomery Cerse, and Mr. Angas, organized the Timuquana Country Club, 'ritzy' from the beginning.

"One of my boyhood friends here was Allan Greeley, some of old man Greeley, superintendent of the old Newman Street Presbyterian Sunday School, who had been sitting on his stumps waiting for something to happen in Jacksonville for many years. Allen

## Library of Congress

was a little older than I was. He used to ride around town in a little white pony, and I would look up to him like he was a little tin god." CHICKEN FIGHTS:

"One of the biggest chicken fights, or cock fights, we ever had was in 1904 right out in the middle of what is now the Avondale residence section. It was high hammock ground, and we went out there because it was far removed from the city. There was an old cracker by the name of Brevalde who had his home and a country store out there, three miles from the nearest house. We fought a game of 6 cocks for a fat purse of a thousand dollars to the winner. On our side was old man Wilson, Major C. D. Boyleston, an [officers?] the 2d Carolina Infantry from [Charleston?], S. C., during the war between the states, [Clarence Dety?] and I. We were quite young. Jerry Smith from across the river was also in our crowd. It took place on the 20th of July.

"In these days there was hardly a [week?] went by that we did not have a cock-fight or a horse race, with pretty stiff stakes and lots of betting." SEMINOLE CLUB:

"About that time the Seminole Club had moved down on Forsyth street. It was first on the corner of [Megan?], opposite the Windsor Hotel. The members of this club were the ones I used to know the best, because every day at noon you could find the same bunch there. They were old Major Durkee, (Dr. Durkee's father), Major Coffin, who was in charge of some northern land syndicate, with an office in Jacksonville, who always had plenty of money, Dr. Fernandez, Dr. Frank D. Miller. Frank Leslie, the first agent of the Clyde Line, R. H. Liggett, who married Lura [Ambler?], daughter of the banker, who used to own this building -(the Law Exchange Building). These young men were the main support of the bar in the Seminole Club, and the bar ran the Club." LIVERY STABLES:

"Some people I used to know and like very much were 7 Mr. McGinnis who owned a fine livery stable located where the Park Hotel now is, with fine horses and carriages for hire. Then came Tom [McMurray?], and engaged in the same business.

## Library of Congress

"McMurray was the first United States Marshal here after the war between the States. He went out and single-handed captured the last KuKlux in Florida, about [a?] hundred miles from Palatka. We brought him into Palatka and down to Jacksonville by boat in the latter 1860's. There were no railroads in those days, and all traffic was by boats up the St. Johns River, served by several different lines - I forget their names now. But there were several enormous packets tied up at the Jacksonville wharves." LUMBER MILLS:

"There were big lumber mills, too, - John Clarke, Henry Clark, Cashen's, Buckey's, Fairchild's and after then came the Cummers in the early 1890's, or the latter 1880's, putting in at that time the biggest mill in the United States at Milldale. The cummers established a record for themselves in financing. They are the old people who ever came to Florida with a bank roll and got out 'alive, so to speak. But they invested at the right time, sold at the peak of the lumber industry, and retired with their heads high, the bit in their mouth, and their tails over the dashboard." MEMORIES:

"In Jacksonville's history, there are four things which I will always stand out in my memory:

"First, was in my early boyhood the trip by boat up the St. Johns River and landing in Fairfield at the old state Fairgrounds - and they had good fairs in those days, with lots of entertainment and horse racing.

"[Second?], the great fire on May 3, 1901. I had been over in town in the morning, and as I left to catch the boat across the river where a dray awaited me to make the trip to Alexandria Villa, I passed the fire station where the central fire station now is on Adams and Ocean streets. The alarm sounded and Chief Haney streamed out in the big /red [?]-devil of a fire truck, drawn by the two handsome bay horses of the fire department. It was just 12 o'clock. It was a hot day, and I remember thinking to myself, " Well, Chief Haney has picked out a hot day, with heat rising in layers from the streets, for a fire, and I hope it does not last long."

## Library of Congress

"I went on home - four miles from the Jacksonville Ferry, and as dinner was being served, I said to the butler, ""Pearson, what makes it so dark? Is there an eclipse of the sun."" He went to the north window and looked towards Jacksonville, and rushed back with tense face - "Fore God, Master David, it [suah?] looked like the end of the world! Come, look!" There was a clump of imported bamboo at least forty feet high growing on the lawn just about twelve feet from the north window, and above that was a sheet of flames from the burning Jacksonville, lurid and rearing, fanned by a high wind, and above that a pall of black smoke that obscured the sun and make it dark as night at our place. I shall never forget that picture - the sheet of flames above the bamboo 9 and the black smoke rolling heavenward.

"By 2 o'clock I was again at the ferry slip and took the last boat across to the Jacksonville side. My third memory is the picture of that wharf - filled with precious belongings of Jacksonville citizens, who hoped in vain to gain transportation to the south side of the river. There were family portraits, clothing, bric-a-brac, baskets of silver, trunks filled with heirlooms and precious documents and papers, and the people with their panic-stricken faces as the fire leaped by bounds to the water's edge, destroying the wharf itself! No, I shall never forget that picture.

"I had a Sunday School teacher by the name of Mrs. Root, who kept a boarding house at Monroe and Adams streets. I fought my way to the Root house and from there saw my fourth picture - two big hotels - the Windsor and the St. James - flames shooting from every window, flames high in the air from the roofs, a million dollars going up in flames, but what a magnificent sight the two big buildings made as they yielded their [greatness?] to the fire!

"I some way managed to make my way to the west side, or LaVilla, section and got home late that night." INTERESTING PEOPLE:

## Library of Congress

"The most interesting people I have known in Jacksonville were Tom McMurray, Major Boyleston, a South Carolinian, mentioned above, W B. Barnett, who established the Barnett National Bank in 1877, Dr. J. L'Engle, and Arthur [Basnett?], who had charge of the Astor estate holdings in Jacksonville.

10

"The first bank of the Barnett's was known as the National Bank of Jacksonville, and was located where the west building now stands on Bay Street, corner of Laura. MITCHELL ANCESTRY:

"When the first Gordon of whom there is any record at all, one of the companions of William the Conqueror, came over from Normandy with him to England, there was with him a Huge de Michell from a little town in Normandy. When I was in Scotland in 1889 I saw the document giving the names of William, the Conqueror's company - the gentlemen who were entitled to coronets - and remember the mention of de Michell, the first Mitchell. The sheepskin record looked like a piece of wrapping paper, and it was difficult to decipher, but others who have since seen this document bear the same testimony. When William had been in England six or eight months, he himself indicated the ones who were to be the knights of Scotland. He appointed King David, who was the first king of Scotland. David was looking for a wife, and Duke William made a deal by which his sister, Bertha, was to be married to King David, and with her he sends a great train of followers - the Gordons who were given land in Scotland, (Aberdeen), and Huge de Michell who also went to Aberdeen to settle on the land he was allotted. /He was given the title of 'Earl.' The DeMichells or Mitchells, as they later became known, have been land-owners in Scotland ever since. They did not emigrate from England, but came from France - the province of Normandy.

11

"One of the last to live on the Earl's land was my grandfather's brother, George Mitchell, who had fourteen sons. They scattered over the world - Africa, Australia, India, Egypt,



## Library of Congress

and goodness knows where. a grandson of Uncle George's Mitchell Mackie, married my half-sister, and they went over to live right where the George Mitchells lived in Aberdeen, Scotland. ALEXANDER MITCHELL:

"At the time my grandfather, Alexander Mitchell, came to the United States in [1838?], Fort Dearborn, later known as Chicago, was a mere hamlet. His friend, George Smith, never lived in Chicago. He ran a bank in Peterhead, which carried the business of four states - Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Michigan. As I said, he had this small bank, when my grandfather graduated from Aberdeen University in 1837, and Smith sent my grandfather to the United States, to that new section of the country, to take charge of this bank which had just been chartered, and was doing a business of probably fifteen to twenty-five dollars a day. With him came other Scotchmen - Neiland, McGeren, and with my [?] grandfather became the first settlers of the city which later became Milwaukee. Here it was that Alexander Mitchell started his great financial enterprises.

"John D. Rockefeller ruined the great Chicago, Milwaukee and Saint Paul Railroad, but it cost him a pretty penny in the end, for he had to pay as high as \$5,000 a share for some of the stock.

12

"Joseph Randall was another Scotchman who early located in Milwaukee, and when Harrison Reed, who was my grandmother Mitchell's brother was appointed the first Territorial Governor of Florida after the War between the States, he made Joseph Randall the Chief Justice. I was over in Tallahassee the other day talking with Chief Justice Whitfield, and he said that Judge Randall had the greatest knowledge of law of any Chief Justice who ever lived in Florida.

"When he retired from the office of Chief Justice of Florida, in 1893 he came to Jacksonville and formed a law partnership with a Mr. Walker and Stephen E. Foster, who had been a law clerk and former office boy, but was so bright he was taken into the firm,

## Library of Congress

which was known as Randall, Walker and Foster. I remember Randall very well as a child, because his long white beard reminded me of a billy-goat.

“From the beginning, Alexander Mitchell exerted a great influence over the State of Wisconsin. He had always been a Democrat, but when the War between the states came on, at his own expense go raised a company of militia, of which my father, Alexander Mitchell, Jr., was Lieutenant, and a nephew from Scotland, Robert Cheves, was Captain. It was known as the 22nd Wisconsin Regiment. Bob Cheves was killed in the battle of Missionary Ridge.

“My grandfather, Alexander Mitchell, had a big pull in Washington /with Lincoln, and when peace was declared and it came time to deal out the ‘pap’ he used his influence with those influential in Government affairs at the national Capital to have his brother-in-law, Harrison Reed, appointed Territorial Governor of Florida.

13

“Harrison Reed was editor and founder of the Milwaukee Sentinel, one of the early influential newspapers of the north, and had written the Manifesto of Fond du Lac, (French, end of the lake) which became the platform and was the beginning of established principles of the Republican Party.

“The Republican Party in 1856 ran Fremont for representative for Congress, and when Lincoln went to the House as a Representative and had his famous debate with Stephen Douglass, his fame swept the country like wildfire, and Uncle Harrison simply worked his head off for Lincoln, which made him well known nationally.

“Grandmother Mitchell came to Florida to visit Uncle Harrison in 1867 she was so taken with the state that she decided to establish a winter home here, and bought the land on the South side from D. Z. Ambler, who was the funniest old thing and very disagreeable, but also very smart.

## Library of Congress

"Up to the time my grandmother built her well known Alexandria Villa, there was not a sewer south of Charleston, South Carolina. But she had sewers put in over considerable local advice and objections in favor of the long used cess pools, even before the house was built. The house, a rambling frame structure, faced the St. Johns River. She could not obtain the big dimension lumber she required in Jacksonville, so the lumber was ordered from Baltimore and brought down on schooners. She also brought down expert builders and machines, so that every item was properly taken care of.

14

"The artesian wells for water supply were also her idea. The first men that came down here drilling wells found her eager to experiment, and they sent down a 2-inch drill twelve hundred feet, but they did not even get a heavy 'dew,' but grandmother told them, 'You are not to stop. Here is some money; try again,' but they had no success. About 1886 there was another outfit who asked for some land, and she gave them two acres, on which they built a house and started drilling another well. This is the one on the road north of the house, which had only two or three pounds pressure, not enough to make it of much value in piping.

"In 1889 a Mr. Wade came and drilled a 6-inch well, which proved satisfactory, furnishing plenty of water for the house, the grounds and the stables.

"Right after that the wells for Jacksonville's water supply were drilled.

"But then, very few people used water for anything except bathing; it was not good form, and is the same now!" HENRY M. STANLEY:

"The first time Henry M. Stanley was heard of, he was a reporter for the old Jacksonville News-Herald in the 1870's. Then he went to New York and worked as a reporter on the New York Herald, and when that paper undertook the search for the explorer, Dr.

## Library of Congress

Livingston, in Africa, Henry M. Stanley was sent as their representative. But he made his start right here in Jacksonville.

ALEXANDER MITCHELL, my grandfather, died in New York City in 15 April, [1887?].

“I do not remember offhand when his friend and sponsor, George Smith, of Aberdeen, Scotland, died, but it was when Winston Churchill was Chancellor of England. I remember in commenting on his death, he referred to the fact that George Smith's death tax was sufficient to pay for a whole new battleship. He passed away after my grandfather, I remember that, but I do not know now what year it was.”